
Inside Out: Understanding and Engagement

By Roger D'Aprix

The simplistic argument is that if we communicate effectively with people, we have an excellent chance of obtaining their engagement with their work and with the goals of the organization.

Anyone who works in our profession is a believer in the tremendous power of communication. We tend to see it as the lubricant that makes an organization work. We recognize its great emotional power to win hearts and minds. We see over and over how it can influence and shape opinions. We experience its ability to persuade people to go along with changes that initially they may strongly resist.

What we often don't recognize, however, is that it is not an end in itself. It is instead the process that is used to achieve an outcome. And it is outcomes that we are really interested in. This may sound like an esoteric point, but I have come to believe that failure to recognize and acknowledge it is the Achilles heel of our profession.

The organizational leaders that hire us and pay us are not enamored with communication as a process. In fact, if truth be told, they are mistrustful and fearful of the process because they understand that there is risk connected with it. They may say the wrong thing at the wrong time. They may have their words used against them in different circumstances. They may be totally misunderstood. They may even be mocked and have their personal reputations impugned.

So when we extol the virtues of communication, we are often extolling the wrong thing. What we should be seeking is particular outcomes—understanding, acceptance, endorsement, agreement, appreciation or whatever reaction we want for a decision or an action. In some ways that is also a slippery slope because we know that we can't control outcomes; we can only influence them. The control is always in the hands of the individual on the receiving end of the message. It is his or her choice that makes the difference.

So we need to be very careful in what we promise. Engagement, the hot communication topic these days, is a good case in point. The simplistic argument is that if we communicate effectively with people, we have an excellent chance of obtaining their engagement with their

If we do our job right, we are supplying the information that allow for informed understanding and gives us an excellent chance at having people make a choice in favor of the organization.

work and with the goals of the organization. Many of today's engagement efforts are predicated on that simple exchange. What those efforts overlook is that engagement is essentially a gift that the organization needs to earn by virtue of its actions and words with actions carrying the greater influence. Organizations that continually downsize, outsource and take away have yet to learn that vital lesson.

What's interesting about the gift of engagement is that it is a choice the individual makes based on his or her understanding of the organization's reality. Much of the engagement rhetoric these days is based on the rubric of employee satisfaction. Issues such as: "I'm recognized and valued; I know what's expected of me; My opinions count; I have the opportunity to give my best; etc." are offered as the determinant of engagement. What's more, the implication is that engagement is a permanent condition that is reached once and held for the long term.

A more real world explanation is that engagement is a temporary condition subject to change at any moment based on one's understanding of his or her situation. In other words it is a choice based on the power of understanding. The question is what shapes that understanding. In my view it is a combination of several things—the dynamics of the marketplace, the business strategy the organization chooses to cope with that marketplace, how the actions and words of the leadership are perceived and the practices and policies that affect the welfare of the workforce. How all of that is communicated to that workforce is a critical question. Is the intent to use the communication process to influence outcomes? If so, does that communication lead to the clear understandings that allow people to make an intelligent and informed choice regarding their engagement?

If we do our job right, we are supplying the information that allows for informed understanding and gives us an excellent chance at having people make a choice in favor of the organization. The kicker here is that all of this has to be properly aligned. That means that the communication process is reflecting the consistent messages sent by the organization's leadership.

If you look at high performing organizations, the chances are that they do exactly that. The marketplace, the strategy, the words and actions of the leadership and all of the employee policies and practices send the same consistent message. And it is that message that leads to understanding and the choice to engage or disengage—a choice that is made not once but over and over again, depending on one's understanding at any point in time. The result of that choice both individually and collectively is performance. And performance is the outcome that senior leaders desperately want.

Bottom line, our goal should be to seek favorable performance outcomes through the power of understanding informed by the process of communication, which is never an end in itself but only a means. That sort of performance equation is the one that senior leaders are much more inclined to buy and support.